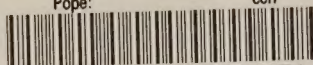


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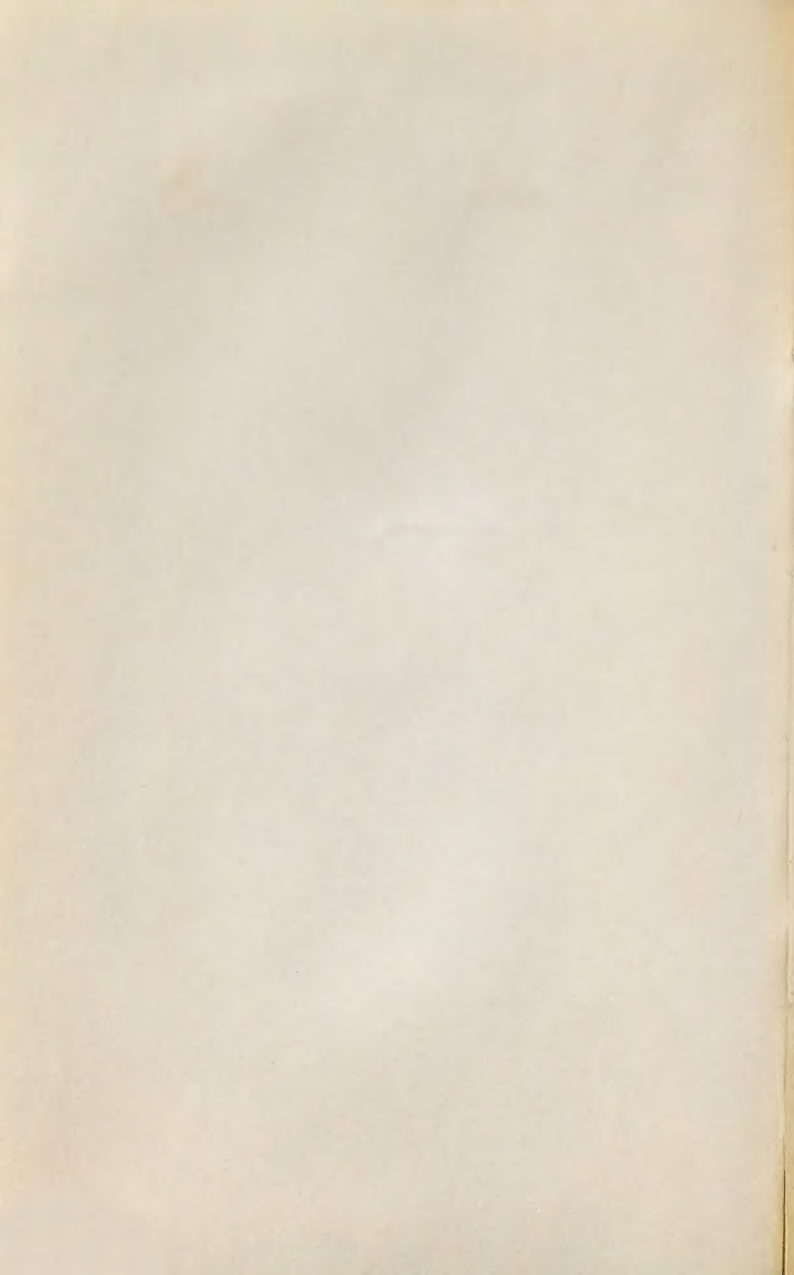
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P O P E

THE LESLIE STEPHEN LECTURE
DELIVERED BEFORE
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

10 MAY 1919

BY

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P O P E

WHEN I was honoured by the request to give a lecture on this foundation, it seemed to me that I could not choose a more appropriate subject than that great figure in English letters on whom Leslie Stephen himself has written with such mastery and insight. His monograph on Pope appeared nearly forty years ago. It is a work admirable alike in its width and exactness of knowledge, in its clarity, balance and justice. As a critical biography dealing with Pope's whole personality and his whole historical and literary environment, it cannot be replaced, and hardly even now requires to be supplemented. But the revaluation and reinterpretation of an artist and his art are another matter. On these there is no final judgment. Poetry means to each generation, even one might say to each individual, something different.

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Its vital quality varies with the temperament, the tradition, the orientation of the minds which approach it. Hence all poetry bears in itself the call for perpetual reinterpretation.

This is true of the steadiest poetical fames ; and that of Pope has notoriously fluctuated, has been, almost from his own time, the subject of acute controversy. To this must be added, that appreciation or depreciation of his poetry has been much deflected by irrelevant interests. It has been treated far too often as ancillary to, or to be judged by, his personal character on the one hand, and the social, political and intellectual life of his circle on the other. Mr Courthope for instance bases its importance largely, or even mainly, on its personal interest and its historical value. But poetry as poetry is not a biographical or historical document. And criticism of his poetry has been much mixed up with the disparate problem of his own moral character. On this I do not propose to

enlarge. It is a study of intense psychological interest, but not pleasant. Whatever record leaps to light under the searching analysis of his biographers only confirms the pitiless sentence of Macaulay, 'lying and equivocation was the habit of his life': of Leslie Stephen, 'he was, if one must speak bluntly, a liar and a hypocrite': of Mr Courthope himself, 'in the execution of his schemes there was no form of deceit, from equivocation to direct falsehood, which he hesitated to employ.' But poetry is not to be so judged. Milton was not a shining example of the domestic virtues. Coleridge had no morals at all. When Pope writes

Teach me to feel another's woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me,

we may smile or sigh, or merely gasp ; but the question (as with the criticism made by Wordsworth's friends on his Ode to Duty) is not whether the poet ob-

served his own precepts, but what is the quality of the poetry. In this as in so many other matters, the nineteenth century went widely astray. We must hark back, and start afresh from a less confused view.

The customary belief as to Pope may be summed up thus: that, in virtue mainly of his later work, the *Essay on Man* and the *Satires* and *Epistles*, he occupied a place of unique and unchallenged supremacy in English poetry for fifty or sixty years; that this tradition was broken towards the end of the century by the Romantic School; that it finally died with Byron, so far as Byron's own estimate was not a provocative paradox; and that attempts to reinstate it, then and since, have been artificial, like revivals of Queen Anne fashions in architecture or furniture. 'Ever since the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century,' Mr Lang writes in his *History of English Literature*, 'people have asked, Was Pope a poet?'

But both dates and facts of this popular view are hopelessly wrong. The Romantic revival itself began in Pope's own lifetime. Pope won his full fame by his early, and now generally decried or discredited, poetry. It was consolidated, rather than increased, by his Homer; with his Iliad it reached its climax. His later work, on which the greatest store is set by more recent critics, was received by its own generation rather with the respect due to the work of an acknowledged master than with the enthusiasm evoked by a substantive achievement. The Essay on Man, one might almost say, slunk into the world; in 1738, Johnson's London halved the honours, if not more, with the Epilogue to the Satires; and the definite reaction set in about a couple of years later. Pope had created a school and established a tradition. But neither the school nor the tradition was ever, except as regards technique of versification, dominant over the whole field of English poetry; and

even as regards that technique, Pope's rhymed couplet was never more than one among other established poetical forms; both in and after his time, blank verse had quite an equal vogue. In the heroic couplet indeed, the type established by him had a dominating and cramping effect on his successors. Though in Johnson's hands it took an added weightiness, in Goldsmith's a new melodiousness, it remained for a long time substantially what Pope had made it, and it was not until the full disengagement of the Romantic movement that the tradition was broken. Cowper's saying that he

Made poetry a mere mechanic art,
And every warbler has his tune by heart,

is directed not against Pope himself, but against his imitators; a similar criticism may be made on the post-Augustan Latin hexameter without any derogation from the praise of Virgil. Cowper's couplet immediately follows a high and just tribute to Pope's own 'musical finesse' and 'delicate touch.' It was on

matters of versification and diction, particularly the latter, that the attack of the Lake Poets was primarily based. On the more fundamental issue of his poetical quality they did not go beyond what had been openly said by critics half a century before.

When, or by whom, the daring question, Whether Pope were a poet? was first raised, cannot perhaps be certainly determined. The famous sentence in the last paragraph of Johnson's Life is curiously, and it would seem purposely, uninforming as to this. 'It is surely superfluous,' he writes, 'to answer the question that has once been asked, Whether Pope was a poet? otherwise than by asking in return, If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?' The allusion is generally read as referring to Joseph Warton's Essay published in 1756. But Warton, if he thought so, took care not to say so. Willing to wound, he was afraid, or felt himself unable, to strike. 'I do not think him,'

he says, 'at the head of his profession.' 'What is there transcendently sublime or pathetic in Pope?' 'The specific quality of 'the true poet' he defines as 'a creative and glowing imagination'; and this indeed he seems to deny to Pope, or to allow it only to a few of his poems. Yet five and twenty years later, and in answer as may be conjectured to Johnson's Life of the year before, he insisted that it was a misinterpretation to make him insinuate that Pope was not a great poet, and that he only says, and thinks, that he was not the greatest. The fact is that the first counter-reaction in favour of Pope had then fully set in. A similar reaction has followed closely upon each successive wave of disparagement, and begun to take effect before that wave had reached its crest, so that, as in the resultant of two plotted curves, the level of his fame has rather undulated than swung sharply from elevation to depression. There is an interesting illustration of this prompt counter-reaction in that

well-known chapter of *The Newcomes* where the Colonel listens in bewilderment to the literary talk of Clive and his friends. 'He heard that there had been a wicked persecution against Mr Pope's memory and fame, and that it was time to reinstate him'; the plea of vindication was the first he had heard of the attack. This scene is laid soon after the appearance of 'the two volumes by young Mr Tennyson of Cambridge'—the *Poems of 1842*: in the full movement of ascent, that is, of Wordsworthianism, and when the revulsion against the eighteenth century generally was just reaching its height.

Mr Courthope, in the course of his own estimate of Pope's poetry, speaks of Leslie Stephen as too disparaging in his criticism, and as overborne by his Wordsworthian instincts. No doubt there is truth in this; yet the fuller truth is that Stephen, while as a critic of thought, of morals, and of character, he was sound and penetrating, was with-

out that touch of the poet in him which is necessary for the vital appreciation of poetry. He tends to regard poetry as if it were merely a variant of prose, to be weighed and judged on what might be called its prose value. Arnold himself was not wholly free from an analogous defect; when he lays it down that 'Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose' he can hardly escape the alternative charge of wanton paradox or wilful confusion of the issue. Poetry is one thing, prose another. Clarity, precision, good sense are virtues in either. Pope has these, and in fact they are more conspicuous in his verse than in his prose. While Dryden is admittedly one of the great masters of English prose, Pope's, though it belongs to a good school, seldom reaches high excellence. Even at its best it is too elaborate and mannered and uneasy; of his fine preface to the Iliad he said himself that it was 'too much on the great horse.' But it is not

through these virtues in his poetry that Pope takes his rank as a poet.

Pope gave to his age, it has been said, the kind of poetry that it needed. This is true, and in no disparaging sense. But brilliant as was his success in doing so, one may trace in him from the first an unfulfilled promise, an aspiration beyond any actual fulfilment. Such a gift could not be hid. His contemporaries felt it, though they could not well understand it. It is only the existence of such a feeling which accounts for that amazing early conquest which swept him, in spite of every external disadvantage, to his supremacy. 'A young poet, his name is Pope,' Granville wrote when he first appeared on the horizon; 'he is not above seventeen or eighteen years of age, and promises miracles.' When he was five and twenty, Swift called him the best poet in England. Nor was this a partial and merely insular judgment; for Voltaire, a few years later, writes of 'Mr Pope, the best poet of England, and

at present of all the world.' It is not then astonishing, though it may lead us to revise our point of view, that we find Warton, after Pope's death, and when the first reaction against him was at its height, deliberately expressing the opinion that 'the reputation of Pope as a poet among posterity will be principally owing to his Windsor Forest, his Rape of the Lock, and his Eloisa to Abelard.'

The body of earlier poetry represented by these three pieces has since dwindled in its reputation. The Pastorals by which he made his first fame are generally discredited or ignored; more so than a large judgment will fully ratify. They suffer indeed from the mannerism of the period; but much of the condemnation bestowed on them is really condemnation not of them, but of the pastoral as a form of poetry. To that extent, it is vitiated by the same failure of understanding, the incapacity to appreciate poetry as art, which is at the root of Johnson's attack on Lycidas. The charge

of immaturity and conventionality may be, and is, made equally against Virgil's Eclogues. Pope's Pastorals do not indeed like the Eclogues mark the opening of a new age and a new birth for poetry. But we may nevertheless find in them a movement towards revolution, and the accents, still unsustained and uncertain, of a new poetical voice.

Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade,
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade;
Where'er you tread the blushing flowers shall rise,
And all things flourish where you turn your eyes—

these lines, so fine in phrasing, so elastic in rhythm, have become inseparable from the exquisite music to which Handel wedded them when he took the words for his opera of Semele. But their own melodiousness—faultless but for the single awkward epithet in the third line—melts into Handel's music like a tune into a tune. If we compare them with Pope's own extant first draft, we shall realise how from the first he was, what Warton denied, a great

‘inventor’ (as we should now say, an imaginative creator) as well as a great improver. And from this we shall be led on to see, more largely, how, great as his achievement is, his aim and ambition were greater; how they imply, and sometimes touch, those heights of poetry which are trodden by the immortals alone.

For such soaring flights of song the age indeed was not propitious; though, if we look a little deeper, perhaps no age is. In our own poetry, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, all make the same complaint of their age. Virgil had done so before them, and other poets, very likely, as long before Virgil. What English poetry needed, after the comparative anarchy of the previous century, was discipline. That requirement Pope met and fulfilled: but in a sense, he spent himself in doing so. The reaction against lawless romanticism, like all such reactions, overshot its mark; it passed, even in Pope himself, and more dis-

astrously in the school of those who had his tune by heart, down to the final degradation of Darwin and Hayley, into an academic and devitalised classicism. But Pope is more than a classicist ; he is an authentic classic, and in that sense in which the finest classical poetry includes and absorbs romance. And for Pope at his finest—by which I mean, at his poetically highest—we have to go not to the Satires and Epistles, but to the work of his early and middle period ; oftener than is generally realised, to his earlier poems. In these there is, here and there, a beauty of melody, a clear flame of imagination, such as seldom recurs in his mature work. That maturity was reached through severe and cramping discipline, in a mind which had fretted and laboured itself to exhaustion. In these too, the metrical mechanism, which afterwards became unduly rigid, is still elastic and is already masterly. In one of his boyish trial-pieces, the translation from the Thebaid, one comes on this :

All birds and beasts lie hushed ; sleep steals away
The wild desires of men and toils of day,
And brings, descending thro' the silent air,
A sweet forgetfulness of human care :

a little later, in the Temple of Fame—
a piece which as a whole is only an
elaborate school-exercise :

How vain that second life in others' breath,
The estate which wits inherit after death !
Ease, health and life for this they must resign ;
Unsure the tenure, but how vast the fine !

and between the two, in Windsor Forest,
the noble passage—too splendid to be in-
sincere, one would say without hesitation
were it from the pen of any other poet—
on the life of the happy man, 'wandering
thoughtful in the silent wood,' the Muse
and Nature his companions, with its
magnificent climax :

Bids his free soul expatiate in the skies,
Amid her kindred stars familiar roam,
Survey the region, and confess her home.

To a poet who could write thus in youth,
one might think no height of Helicon
was unscaleable. But in Pope the *élan
vital* was from the first weak and inter-

mittent. He was crippled by wretched health: 'this long disease, my life,' of which he speaks so pathetically, was no over-description. He was the feeble child of old parents—his mother was forty-eight when he was born—sickly and almost if not quite deformed; and over-study and over-excitation of the brain in his precocious childhood destroyed any chance there might have been of coaxing him into normal health. The frail machine was heavily over-engined; and the body reacted on the mind. Hence his mixture of feverish ambition and morbid timidity, the self-consciousness which he could rarely shake off, the dissatisfaction with even his own best work that would never let him leave it alone, the fastidiousness which was not kept under control by either his pride or his good sense. At the age of twenty-seven, at the summit of his fame, not yet worn out by the ten years' labour of his Homer and the longer and more shattering war with the dunces, he writes that he is 'out of humour with

myself, fearful of some things, wearied of all.' *Alas, the warped and broken board, how can it bear the painter's dye?* Johnson notes, with true insight, that he was 'a mind always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.' 'What I wrote fastest,' he said himself, 'always pleased most.' But his consciousness of his own genius never reached confidence in it; he had not strength enough to stand alone, or to advance fearlessly in the realm that lay open to him. He fell under the domination of Swift; he fell later, and as disastrously, under the domination of Bolingbroke; he knew it, and stung back by treating both with inexcusable perfidy. He even crept under the shield of that gladiator with the soul of an attorney, the brazen-mouthed and iron-lunged Warburton. It was not from such sources that his own flame of creative imagination could be fed or rekindled. The genius which in a healthier and happier nature might have expanded magnificently, fail-

ing to find outlet, festered inwardly, became toxic, poisoned his life and infected his poetry. Even his pride—

Yes, I am proud, I must be proud to see
Men, not afraid of God, afraid of me—

was mixed up with pitiable cowardice. 'Without courage,' in the words of Scott, 'there cannot be truth, and without truth there can be no other virtue.' It is one of the tragic ironies of life that the great obstacle to Pope's fame is his own wretched anxiety for it. He could criticise himself, and does, with as much insight as any of his critics, but he could not liberate himself: 'a bitter heart that bides its time and bites.'

To this morbid self-consciousness it is due not only that he squandered his genius on petty personal rancours, not only that neither friend nor enemy, neither man nor woman, could ever safely trust him, but also that his work is often most superb where it fluctuates on the edge of burlesque. The Rape of the Lock is by general assent one of the few perfect



things in English poetry. It is, in its kind, the high-water mark of poetry, and of no poetry in any kind can one say more. But further, it is worth remarking that what ~~Johnson said of it~~, 'New things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new,' is the essential definition of poetry itself, and the note of poetry at its highest. It is in effect what Shelley says in one of his most profound and illuminating sentences: 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.' It was Pope's timidity and low vitality, not his good sense, that kept him moored to the ground. The Essay on Man is only the most conspicuous instance of what is characteristic of his work as a whole, that it has not full head of pressure behind it, that it falls short in large constructive power and in continuous inspiration.

This weakness was his, but it was likewise a weakness of his age. Pope's lifetime is almost coincident with a singular sub-

Remember
mergence of the lyrical instinct which
before and after it has been the vitalising
element in our poetry. It had kept it
alive in the otherwise bleak and sterile
century which followed Chaucer. It was
the sap and life-blood of the Elizabethan
age, when of every corner of the wide
field of poetry it might be said,

Within this mile break forth a hundred springs.
In the seventeenth century it first spread
into undisciplined luxuriance and then
stagnated and was lost. In Dryden, as
Gray observes in one of his fine criticisms,
'the music of our old versification still
sounded': with him it disappeared. The
so-called lyrical poetry of the first half of
the eighteenth century is null. The only
trickle of the spring that survived was in
the hymn-writers; for a whole generation
and more, Watts, Tate (one of Pope's
dunces, and poet-laureate throughout the
reign of Anne), Doddridge, Charles Wes-
ley are in effect the English lyrical poets.
With them, in virtue of two or at most
three pieces which have taken a place

beyond the reach of criticism, must be included Addison. Pope himself, in his Universal Prayer, just touched the fringe of the group. Except for this, his incursions into lyric poetry are wholly disastrous; all that can be said in extenuation is that they are but few. The only one which is ambitious, his St Cecilia Ode, may fairly claim to be among the worst extant in an age conspicuous for badness.

That submergence of the pure lyric meant the general enfeeblement of lyrical quality, of the singing voice, throughout the whole sphere of poetry. It did not indeed disappear; if it had, poetry would have ceased: nor can it be justly said of it in Pope that the sound is forced, although the notes are few. It is authentically and nobly present in the Elegy; still more so in the Eloisa to Abelard, which it fills throughout except for one unfortunate passage of ten lines and for the disastrous couplet which Pope, by some unaccountable hallucination, tacked

on to the conclusion. It makes music in the Rape of the Lock; it breaks out intermittently in the Satires and Epistles. It glitters fitfully, but often with extraordinary beauty, in the Dunciad.

O born to see what none can see awake,
Behold the wonders of the oblivious lake!

That may be called sublimated burlesque, without derogating from its rank as poetry. But there are many other passages as to which no question can be raised:

Yet, yet a moment one dim ray of light
Indulge, dread Chaos and eternal Night!

or, to come to the best at once, the incomparable

Lo where Maeotis sleeps, and hardly flows
The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows:

Pope's own favourite couplet, according to tradition, in the whole of his work. 'The reason of this preference,' Johnson observes, 'I cannot discover.' It was a pity he could not.

The admixture of pungent satire with high—all but the highest—authentic

lyrical quality is perhaps most conspicuous in a justly famous passage in the *New Dunciad*. His theme is a savage attack on the fashionable Grand Tour as part of the so-called education of the upper classes :

Led by my hand, he sauntered Europe round,
And gathered every vice on Christian ground.

But when he touches Italy his imagination, almost against his will, kindles into flame ; he speaks of her like an artist and a lover, 'and when he speaks he seems to sing.' All the magic of the South rises in his

Love-whispering woods and lute-resounding waves.
With the exquisitely melodious and unforgettable phrases, 'happy convents bosom'd deep in vines,' and 'lily-silvered vales,' it is curious to compare those of Tennyson's *Daisy*, so like and yet so different ; the

—high hill-convent, seen
A light amid its olives green,

and the 'milky-bell'd amaryllis' blowing on the beaches. The one is a landscape

by Claude, the other a water-colour of the English school. Pope, like Tennyson, longed to travel; and he longed to be a painter. He actually worked at painting under Jervas; and all his allusions to the art are those of one who knows what he is talking about.

The *Dunciad* as we possess it—for the earlier version has, I think, seldom been reprinted and is not much known except among students or specialists—is the last and the largest instance of that insatiable thirst for recasting and remodelling his own work which pursued Pope like an obsession. Very often the remodelling did harm rather than good; the triumphant success of the enlarged *Rape of the Lock* was achieved against a risk which Addison was quite right in deprecating, and Pope could not reasonably expect to repeat it. The concluding passage of the *New Dunciad* is poetry before which all criticism has bowed down in admiration. Spence mentions that Pope himself could not repeat it without his voice faltering.

‘And well it might,’ said Johnson when this was told him, ‘for they are noble lines.’ Thackeray was only summing up the consent of the generations when he wrote, ‘No poet’s verse ever mounted higher than that wonderful flight. In these astonishing lines Pope reaches, I think, to the very greatest height which his sublime art has attained, and shows himself the equal of all poets of all times.’ The admiration can hardly be called excessive, or the praise extravagant. Yet appreciation may look closer and weigh in finer scales if we regard the passage in its germination and growth. We possess it in three successive forms. In the first edition of the original *Dunciad* it is only in germ and consists of but six lines:

Then, when these signs declare the mighty year,
When the dull stars roll round and reappear,
Let there be darkness, the dread Power shall say;
All shall be darkness, as it ne’er were day:
To their first chaos wit’s vain works shall fall
And universal darkness cover all.

The thought is there; and in this first sketch there are already two of the im-

mortal phrases. But the art has not wrought itself out: the expression halts, and the fourth line is quite feeble and vapid. In the revised edition of the next year, the six lines have become twenty-two, and have been transfigured. When he remodelled the whole poem a dozen years later, Pope took out the magnificent opening couplet, and reinserted it, rather awkwardly, a little further back in Book III; the remaining twenty lines he completely rewrote and expanded into thirty. Five couplets are added; the order of the others is materially changed, and only four are left unaltered in wording. Preference here is a matter of opinion; I can only express my own, and quote the whole passage in what I hold to be its noblest and most perfect form:

Signs following signs lead on the mighty year;
See! the dull stars roll round and reappear.
She comes! the cloud-compelling Power, behold!
With Night primeval, and with Chaos old.
Lo! the great Anarch's ancient reign restored;
Light dies before her uncreating word.
As one by one, at dread Medea's strain,

The sickening stars fade off the ethereal plain;
As Argus' eyes, by Hermes' wand oppressed,
Closed one by one to everlasting rest;
Thus at her felt approach and secret might
Art after art goes out, and all is night.
See skulking Truth in her old cavern lie,
Secured by mountains of heaped casuistry:
Philosophy, that touched the heavens before,
Shrinks to her hidden cause, and is no more:
See Physic beg the Stagyrite's defence!
See Metaphysic call for aid on sense!
See mystery to Mathematics fly!
In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.
Thy hand, great Dulness! lets the curtain fall,
And universal darkness buries all.

The first reaction against Pope did not touch his Homer. The only disparaging criticism made on it for half a century was Bentley's on its first appearance, if we neglect, as we may, the attacks of the dunces. Bentley's comment stung Pope, as all criticism did; but it was too obviously true, and too free from anything like malice, to sting even him deeply. He nursed his tepid resentment for twenty years according to his habit, but his rejoinder, the portrait of Aristarchus in the *New Dunciad*, is not venomous, it is (for

Pope) almost good-natured. Bentley's criticism was that of a scholar; the opinion of the world at large was that expressed by Johnson, 'it is the greatest work of the kind that has ever been produced.' This judgment he deliberately reaffirmed when in the Life of Pope he wrote 'It is certainly the noblest version of poetry which the world has ever seen...that poetical wonder...a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal.' Here Gray and Johnson, for once in their lives, were in agreement. 'There would never,' Gray had said even more emphatically, 'be another translation of the same poem equal to it.' His prophecy has so far been justified, at least as concerns the Iliad, which is what he spoke of, and what is usually meant when Pope's Homer is spoken of. No translation of any great work of art can in the nature of things be final; still less can it replace the original; but Pope's Iliad remains an English classic. If it were read more now, it would be depreciated less. For seventy years it held

the field unchallenged. Since then the task has been reattempted by dozens of hands, from Cowper's to those of the present day ; it will be resumed, no doubt, by each age so long as the Iliad and the English language survive. Many of these translations have been skilful and competent ; most of their authors have, it is needless to say, approached their task with a far better equipment of scholarship than Pope. But none of their versions have lived, and Pope's has.

The Augustan diction was established by Pope's Iliad more than by any other work ; it was by it that, in the famous phrase, he 'tuned the English tongue.' Its defects are matter of common knowledge, into which it is needless to enter. When it became a fettering tradition, it provoked a violent revolt. After the liberation had been fully effected, it took its proper place in history, and its merits as well as its defects can be more justly appreciated. These merits are lucidity and dignity. In reading Pope's

Homer one can never be at a moment's loss for the meaning ; and his power, in his chosen medium, of rising to the occasion, of kindling to the heroic temper and giving the Homeric thrill, is unequalled, and one may dare to say, unsurpassable. 'Triviality and meanness'—the words are not those of a conservative reactionary, but of Wordsworth in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads—are 'a defect more dishonourable than false refinement.' With Wordsworth's further contention that this defect is 'less pernicious in the sum of its consequences' we are not here concerned ; Pope was not responsible for the sum of the consequences of his art, but for his art itself. But to raise the issue of artificiality cuts both ways. In the time, now well over, when the Iliad and Odyssey were thought of as 'natural' opposed to 'artificial' epics, the Augustan diction stood necessarily condemned. We know now that they are not natural growths of untrained genius, but the consummation of an extraordi-

narily elaborate art ; an art as elaborate, and as artificial, as conventional in the full sense, as Pope's own. Those very phrases of 'pseudo-poetic diction' as it was called, which a century ago goaded the romanticists into fury—the 'conscious swains' or the 'fleecey care'—having lost their domination, have lost their power to annoy. They are one kind of literary diction, like another. The Biblical vocabulary which Butcher and Lang's *Odyssey* brought into vogue forty years ago—*waxeth faint, gat him up, howbeit* and *yea now* and *verily*—has already become faded and obsolete. Pope's diction was of its age, was living ; the other was only an archaistic revival, whose joints were rather marrowless and its blood decidedly cold. The Augustan diction is that of a long past age, but the blood still pulses in it. In Pope's rendering of the parting of Hector and Andromaché, to take one notable instance, there are about two hundred continuous lines without a single inadequate phrase, a single flat or jarring note,

even after two hundred years. 'You must not call it Homer': but it is Homer magnificently reincarnated.

Even here, Pope was hampered by his own timidity. From the extant fragments of his rough drafts one can see how he often shrank from what his poetical instinct had shown him; how in his anxiety to forestall the charge of being what was called 'low' he became mannered, and in his sensitiveness to an accusation of 'incorrectness' became monotonous; how he would keep polishing his verse until it lost its ripple and edge. The simile at the end of the eighth Iliad has been habitually cited to prove both his artificiality and his insensitiveness to nature. As it left his hands finally it cannot be defended; it is in his worst manner; the images are blurred away, the diction is unnatural. If we turn to his first hand, we can reconstruct from it a rendering which, though not faultless, must be freed of the heavier censure.

As when the moon in all her lustre bright
O'er heaven's pure azure sheds her silver light,
When no loose gale disturbs the deep serene,
And not a cloud o'ercasts the solemn scene;
Around her throne the vivid planets glow,
And stars unnumbered trembling beams bestow.
O'er the dark trees clear gleams of light are shed
And tip with silver every mountain head;
The valleys open, and the forests rise:
All nature stands revealed before our eyes.

The failure here is not in realisation or in diction; it is in the monotony of the metrical construction. The heroic couplet as regularised by Pope has undeniably this fault. He overdid his work on it; and the larger, freer movement of which in the hands of a few masters before and after him it has proved capable, if it was within his compass, was not consistent with his method of distillation and concentration. His couplets stand apart from one another, like beads on a string; and within the couplet, there is an increasingly uniform metrical balance both between the two lines of the couplet and the two halves of the line. In three of these five couplets the second line begins with 'and';

Pope is becoming a victim to the see-saw movement which his own ear felt and which he expressly condemns. This defect is worst where he has spent the most pains; there are six of these 'and' lines in the eleven couplets of the wonderful Atticus passage. In the Epilogue to the Satires, it has been noted, there is a reversion to a freer pattern; but by that time the mischief was done. Pope had concentrated wholly on this single form of verse, and he became enmeshed in it. The result is that he comes not only to write but almost to think in couplets, and sometimes justifies Coleridge's impatient complaint that 'the mechanical metre determines the sense.' 'A style too pointed and ambitious, and a versification too timidly balanced,' Wordsworth observes more temperately and more justly.

It is the less surprising then that in the *Odyssey*, a task undertaken without enthusiasm and carried out with less than his usual meticulous care, he frees himself more from this cramping regularity. His

portions of the *Odyssey* are the work of a tired man—‘and Homer, damn him, calls’—and often the work is scamped, mechanical, no better than that of his two ghosts, and in fact undistinguishable from theirs, or at least from Fenton’s. Where it is bad, it justifies the worst strictures made on it.

Her beauteous cheeks the blush of Venus wear,
Chastened with coy Diana’s pensive air:

pseudo-poetic diction could hardly go beyond that as representing the pellucid line ‘like Artemis or golden Aphrodite.’ But where it is good, it is his workmanship at its best, for he has not spoiled it by over-anxiety. Take his very first lines, the opening of Book III (Books I and II were left by him to his assistants) :

The sacred sun, above the waters raised,
Through Heaven’s eternal brazen portals blazed,
And wide o’er earth diffused his cheering ray
To gods and men to give the golden day.

But for the over-use of epithet—the besetting sin, as Goldsmith noted in one of his moments of singular insight, of

the whole Augustan and post-Augustan age in English poetry—this is admirable. It may however be remarked in passing as a good instance of a peculiarity of Pope's couplet which has not, so far as I am aware, been ever noticed ; his propensity to rhyming on the *ā* vowel sound. Probably he was unconscious of it himself. From his earliest work to his latest, one constantly comes on six or eight consecutive lines of it ; and I have noted an instance, which may not be unique, where if a single couplet were removed, this assonance would run on for twenty.

Or again in Book V,

Let kings no more with gentle mercy sway
Or bless a people willing to obey,
But crush the nations with an iron rod,
And every monarch be the scourge of God ;

or in Book XIV,

From God's own hand descend our joys and woes ;
These he decrees, and he but suffers those :
All power is his, and whatsoe'er he wills
The will itself, omnipotent, fulfils ;

the thought is modernised, as in a modern translation which purports to be more

than a mere mechanical rendering it must be, and in some sense even ought to be; and in the last passage Pope has, as he often does, completely misunderstood his Greek (τὸ μὲν δώσει, τὸ δ' ἑάσει) from sheer defect of scholarship. Yet of such passages one may again say that if you must not call them Homer, they are nevertheless nobly Homeric.

Whether Pope might have avoided the stiffening and partial sterilisation of the rhymed couplet if he had practised it less exclusively would be a curious rather than a profitable enquiry. It was probably from some feeling of discontent with its limits (or rather, with his own self-created limits in handling it) that towards the end of his life he attempted, apparently for the first time, to write in blank verse. Of his unfinished epic of Brutus no remnant survives. 'Part of the MS., in blank verse, now lies before me,' Ruffhead writes in his Life (1769); but most annoyingly he omits to give even a single specimen. We could have spared for that the detailed

prose sketch of its contents, which Ruff-head prints in full; what matters is not the story, but the treatment. Would Pope's blank verse have been (as is not improbable) like that of Young, as Young's couplet-verse is like Pope's? Would it have turned out little more than rhymeless couplets? or might he perhaps have found in the new medium an access of fresh inspiration? But the epic, like his other unfulfilled project of 'an ode or moral poem on the folly of ambition,' placed in the mouth of a shepherd among the ruins of Blenheim, is a vanished ghost.

It may sound a paradox; but the fact is that Pope's poetry—the same remark applies to others among our great English poets—was not quite in the full central line of evolution. He did miracles, as had been prophesied of him; but his young promise was not wholly fulfilled. He became cramped, not merely by classicism, but by an artificially limited scope of interest; and of course, matter reacted on style. He was a lonely genius,

without the powerful vitality which can draw sustenance from the whole of what life has to offer, and without the icebrook's temper which is necessary for genius if it is to live and thrive alone. Of all the contemporaries who influenced him it may be said that they only did him harm as a poet. Most of all is this true of Swift, the older and stronger man who dominated over Pope's weaknesses and stimulated his faults. The 'unnatural delight in ideas physically impure' was unhappily common to both; and common to both was an attitude towards women which is to many minds hardly less disgusting. 'Most women have no characters at all' may have been, as Pope says it was, Martha Blount's saying and not his own. At all events he seized it and wallowed in it. His cynicism with regard to women is really sentimentality gone tainted; some would say, gone putrid. In his

Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear
And best distinguished by black, brown, or fair,

we have travelled a long way from the
seventeenth century light-heartedness;
from Suckling's gay couplet,

The black, the brown, the fair shall be
But objects of variety.

But still more remarkable is the contrast
it presents to the note of modern roman-
ticism :

C'est chose bien commune
De soupirer pour une
Blonde, châtaine, ou brune
Maîtresse,
Lorsque brune, châtaine
Ou blonde, on l'a sans peine—

so far following Pope almost verbally ;
and then,

Moi, j'aime la lointaine
Princesse.

This, it may be said, is modern senti-
mentality. The Augustan age too was
sentimental, in its fashion. But it drank
its sentiment out of a different jug.

Pope is the fullest of all English poets,
Shakespeare only excepted, of 'quota-
tions' ; lines or phrases which have
become part of our common speech, and

are incorporated in the structure of our common thought. This is itself high praise; but it is not the praise of poetry, which is a subtler thing. The whole of *Paradise Lost* has contributed only some half-dozen such. Young, a poet only of the second or third rank and now almost forgotten, comes I think next after Pope in their abundance. But it is perhaps to these in the first instance that Pope owes his widest and most continuous popular appreciation; and in the second instance, to his 'characters'; to those highly wrought, incisive, elaborately polished passages, detachable from their context, in which he has etched with his mordant acid, and left as imperishable portraits, the souls of men and women whom he loved or hated. Chiefly, they are of those whom he hated; the most brilliant are the most venomous, of those whom he hated, having once loved or admired. His own attempt at excuse—

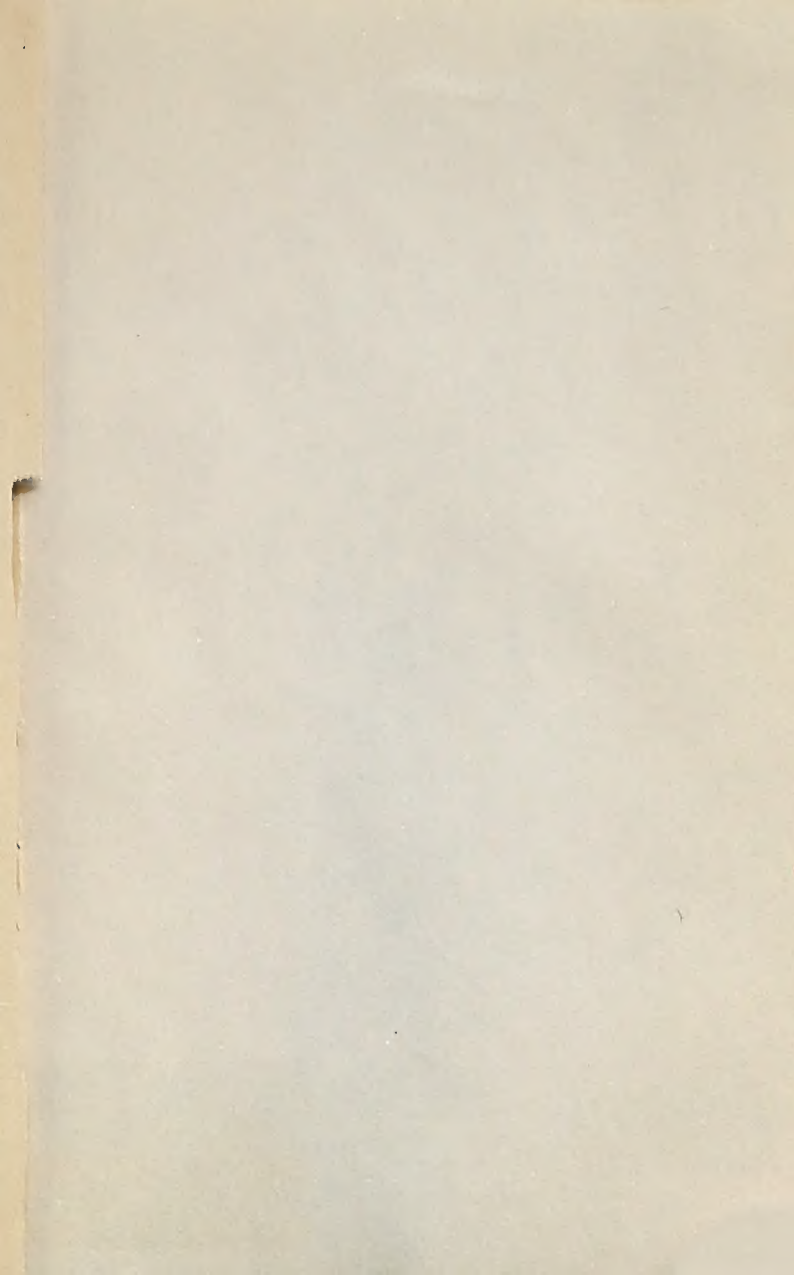
Then why so few commended?—Not so fierce;
Find you the virtue, and I'll find the verse—

is too cynical to carry any conviction. His love was febrile and sickly ; his hatred was a clear consuming flame.

I remember, some five and thirty years ago, spending an evening with Mr Courthope and Mr Lang, when they fought over the old debate as to Pope's poetical quality, and left it a drawn battle. Mr Courthope's view has been fully and repeatedly set forth by himself, in his Life of Pope, in his Oxford lectures, and again in his History of English Poetry. It was unaltered throughout his life. Mr Lang then—he modified his opinion later, more in his antagonist's direction—would only admit that Pope's work was 'poetry with a difference.' Well, all poetry is poetry with a difference ; and it is going the wrong way about to object to one kind of poetry because it is not another kind. If Pope is thought of as a satirist, satire is to be sure not poetry at its highest, is not poetry doing all it can ; though even so it is doing what nothing but poetry can do, and one may remember that Dante

places Horace, not the Horace of the Odes, but the Horace of the Satires, *Orazio satiro*, among the five great poets. But Pope was much more than a satirist.

It is recorded of him that he liked Tasso better than Ariosto ; and the eighteenth century comment on the fact is significant ; ‘his taste had not been vitiated, like Milton’s, by much reading of the Gothic romances of chivalry.’ It is not usual to think of Milton as a lyrist and a romanticist ; but essentially he was both, and unless he had been, he could not have come to be, in the full and complete sense of the word, a classic. Pope is a limited classic, a classic with a difference. But with that difference, within that limit, his poetry is, as only classics are, imperishable. No lapse of time, no change of fashion, can abate ‘that brilliant genius and immense fame.’



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